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A Contrast of Cultures – Comparing Singapore and Thailand in 2023

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Abstract

If you visited Bangkok a decade ago, you would not be able to recognize it today. The skyscrapers are all different and the hotels that were new back then are now renamed and retrofitted. There is still a strong buzz in the usual entertainment districts. The usual academic haunts at Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University are very much the same. The academics are still very political about their views and not worried about lese majeste laws as they were ten years ago. If you visited Singapore a decade ago you would certainly be unable to recognize it in 2023. Singapore is famous for being new. Even if you visited two years ago, you may not be able to recognize it today. So, what has changed and why should we compare the two cities? Why do I think that any comparison would reveal a clash of cultures? The method used in this paper was non-participant observation from June 1-8, 2023.

Keywords: Cultures, Singapore, Thailand, Hotels

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1. Introduction

Thailand's Bangkok today has vastly changed over the past decade; and, like Singapore, skyscrapers of all shapes and colors compete for gentrification and retro-fication. In Bangkok, the focus is on the entertainment district. Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University are as subdued as they were before, morose and taciturn, almost aloof in silence. The academics are very much concerned about being careful about what they say as lese-majeste laws under Rama X still abound. By contrast, Singapore ten years ago was very much a staid and secular island city-state.

But today, it has been rocked by multiple political and sexual scandals under the Lee Hsien Loong regime. After Lee Kuan Yew's death, Lee Hsien Loong's own younger brother and sister accused him of dynastic politics and wrote about nepotism etc. The younger Lee and his lawyerly wife, Suet Fern have come under the possibility of being sued by government ministers. Within the fray are sexual scandals involving the Speaker of the House PAP MP Tan Juan Jin and another PAP MP Cheng Li Hui; PAP MPs Wendy Lim and David Ong.

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Channel News Asia also reported that “Tan Chuan-Jin had been in an “inappropriate relationship” with fellow People’s Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament Cheng Li Hui, which continued even after they were asked to stop, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Monday (Jul 17)”. It is not known why Lee did not sack them immediately or ask them to cease having the affair in spite of having known about their affair with more than sufficient reaction time. “Later, responding to a question on the timeline of the incident, Mr Lee said he was first alerted to the relationship between Mr Tan and Ms Cheng after the last General Election in 2020.

2. Dress Code and Males with Long Hair

In terms of less severe issues, there is no dress code in Thailand for most people. If one works as a civil servant however, one is expected to wear a uniform. This is not the case in Singapore. By contrast, Singapore civil servants wear long sleeves and trousers with shoes, for men; and skirts or pants or mini-skirts for women. The dress code is not always strictly adhered to as many women in Singapore, even civil servants, take off their shoes and wear flip-flops or slippers while in the office. This is not allowed in Thailand. However, the bureaucrats in Singapore close one eye in the Singapore case. There is basically no dress code at Singapore universities for faculty and staff with some exceptions. There is a dress code expected for fire-fighter when fire-fighting; or a police officer when accepting bribes (in Thailand for example) or as a soldier when fighting insurgent Islamicists in the restive Southern Thai provinces for example. It was because of the old colonial penchant for wearing stiff white starched trousers and shirts in the 1900s right up till Malaysia (and Singapore)’s independence that the ridiculous norms of wearing long sleeves and trousers for Singapore civil servants continues. It has become so embedded in the local psyche that to question of challenge such norms is considered bewildering and confusing for many bureaucrats. There are more contrasting norms and values between Singapore and Thailand.

In the 1970s, Lee Kuan Yew and his cohort believed that males with long hair were illegal drug abusers and labelled drug-addicts. This was why there were many signs posted in public offices such as post-offices and other street level agencies that stated clearly in the four official languages “males with long hair will be served last”. Males with long hair were not only thought to be associated with drug addiction but also with the western hippy culture that American television brought along with it. This was also celebrated in the beatnik culture, the hippy-culture, and in movies such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *Woodstock* (1970). Lee and his merry men wanted American investments without American norms. This was not the case in Thailand as the Thai people loved and celebrated all things American ever since the Vietnam War began around 1967.

3. Social Engineering and Population Problems

Thailand has no problem increasing its population size because it is basically a very large agricultural country. The real problem in Thailand is Bangkok-centrism and the desire of many Thai people to move to and live in *Krung Thep Maha Nakorn*.

4. The Case is Very Different in Singapore

By comparison, social engineering by the incumbent People’s Action Party (PAP) government led to the Chinese Singaporean population’s decline where the Chinese were not replacing themselves. This could have been avoided had Lee Kuan Yew taken the advice of Saw Swee Hock, a statistician and former colleague of the author’s at ISEAS. There were also increasing numbers of Chinese men who were discovered to be infertile and hence incapable of having children. The PAP government’s stop at two policy made matters worse, only till it was changed to have two or more if you can afford it. That itself plus the graduate mother’s scheme was a slap in the face of Chinese Singaporeans. Especially those who were western educated and could not speak Chinese like the Chinese from China. This was because the Chinese taught in Singapore schools back then could not be understood clearly by the Chinese in China. This also led to the creation of a mirror city in Shenzhen that took resources away from Singapore without the knowledge of Beijing. As an old Chinese proverb goes, “the mountain is high and the emperor far away” that was once quoted by Lee Kuan Yew himself. Lee’s mistrust of academics was what led him to ignore Professor Saw Swee Hock’s prediction that the Singapore Chinese were not reproducing themselves. Singapore’s PAP social engineering policies were rooted in its public housing policy known back then as the Racial Quota System. The Racial Quota System or

Ethnic Quota System backfired because many (not most) Singaporean Chinese could not get the kind of public housing they preferred. The fall in the Chinese population led to the PAP government inviting more Chinese nationals (now known as New Singaporeans) to become naturalized citizens. This was considered a positive move by some government scholars because it was believed that the New Singaporeans would be grateful for their citizenship and vote for the PAP. It is not known how factual this might be and it is speculative at best. What became a fact was that the New Singaporeans were not willing to adapt to the Singaporean culture. This led to many misgivings and even in some cases hatred between the original Singapore Chinese and the New Singaporean Chinese. The reasons for such hate is because the China Chinese are highly competitive, secretive, help their own, do not speak Singaporean English and tend to be clannish. This is all very much like the first Chinese migrants to Singapore in the 1930s when the city was still under British Occupation. But after so many decades is it logical to keep blaming the colonial masters? The falling Chinese birthrate has led to severe consequences for the National Service requirements. Singapore reached a point where it did not have sufficient soldiers for the Tri-Service Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Nevertheless, looking at the SAF today, one would not think that it does not have enough soldiers. This means that Singapore has done well to meet the problems caused by its falling birth rate.

As noted, Thailand has no problem increasing its population size because it is basically a very large agricultural country. The real problem in Thailand is Bangkok-centrism and the desire of many Thai people to move to and live in Krung Thep Maha Nakorn. Another problem when we compare Thailand with Singapore is that the former has too many people. Ironically, its own military that was designed for external defence has been used since the 1970s for internal defence and internal security. This is supported by the many deaths of Islamicist insurgents in the restive Southern provinces Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. The Muslims have also killed Buddhist Security Volunteers, schoolteachers, Muslims who speak Thai, as well as members of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) that is based in Bangkok. At least 6,080 people have died on both sides in the Islamic insurgency. The intention of the Islamicists continues to remain the same: to establish a pan-Islamic Caliphate that is modeled on a mythical (and hence non-existent) 14th century Islamic Caliphate in the South. On April 28, 2004, about 125 Islamicists attacked 10 police stations in Yala, Pattani, Yala, and Songkhla Provinces. It is not known till today how many Islamicists died from their attacks but were held up and injured when they retreated to the Pattani-based Krue Se Mosque. An external report some months later pinpointed the Commander of the Fourth Army Region General Pisarn Wattanawongkiri as being the primary target for those injured. That external report was later invalidated as it had been financed by Arab royalty and written by pro-Muslim scholars in Malaysia, a country that lies south of the Thai provinces in question. Arab royalty are often donating money to destabilize the region as seen in the multi-billion US\$1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal that toppled the Malaysian Najib Razak government, and involved Singapore-based banks as well as the US Department of Justice.

On October 2004, the town of Tak Bai in Narathiwat Province was considered more severe by Thai and Malaysian political scientists since at least 78 Islamicists died. The Commander of ISOC was General Pallop Pinmanee who disagreed with then PM Chavalit over the outcome of the incident or massacre. On November 2, 2006, Thai Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont formally apologized for the incident, an apology that came more than two years after the case. It was considered a massacre because many of the 78 Islamicists apparently died from asphyxiation or from gun-shot wounds to the head. In 2009, 41 people were killed and 60 wounded in June in Yala province in a gunfight between RTP officers and Islamicists. Most of those killed were Muslim terrorists but several RTP officers were also killed.

By comparison, Singapore is much more politically stable and non-violent when compared to Thailand. While weapons are banned in Singapore, all sorts of weapons can be bought or traded in Thailand and nearby Malaysia. Singapore is significantly smaller and much easier to control by the police than Thailand or Malaysia. The next section is about a less gory issue.

5. Thai Street Culture

Walking along Sukhumvit Soi Nana, one comes across Nana BTS which is in the Klong Thoei Area. For at least two decades, this has been street walker central where freelancers and other women of easy virtue are up for sale. The walkers usually do not approach customers except greet them with a smile. Potential johns must approach them first. That is just a norm that is accepted. The prices vary with the time of day and the length of service. Depending on the economic micro-system, it may be cheaper to hire two ladies rather than one. Three

women are always more difficult to handle than two and may end up in loss of property or cash and credit cards. Prostitution is illegal in Thailand but the authorities always close one eye because many of the sites and places of ill-repute are in fact owned by RTP police colonels or high ranking RTAF generals. The profits are so large that they are able to send their children for overseas education and courses in Singapore and the United States for long term education. Thai street culture is not only restricted to prostitution and often involves street food. Thai street food is world famous for its spiciness, cheapness and tastiness. Prices range from 25 baht for some fruit to over 150 baht for more complex dishes. 100 baht is worth about SGD3.20 or less.

There are entire families that run such street corner businesses as well as the families of rats that live under those stalls and in the sewers below. This can be observed on a daily basis near Ramada Hotel soi 11 as well as most other convenient locations. The street stalls are often located at some distance from 5-star hotels such as the Hyatt Regency, the Private Suites in Sathorn, and major shopping centers such as Central World. But the street stalls are always on the move and those who do not pay for mafia protection or RTP police protection must keep moving to survive. If they are caught, their entire livelihood is destroyed. And they also face prison terms.

The local Indian tailors of course are another important site along every street. Although they are not street hawkers, their virtual omnipresence makes them part and parcel of street life. They offer all kinds of foreign cloths and stolen Italian, French, European and American designs. Some are old, others modified. Their attraction is that these garments are relatively cheap when compared to the real thing. They also offer bigger discounts for those who buy suits, shirts and trousers. They are all made within 24 hours and delivered to your hotel room. Note that most South Asians do not make any purchases from these Indian-Thai tailors and for good reason. The Crown Tailor at Pathumwan Hotel Arcade for example is known for hood-winking the uninitiated. But their shop is still operating at the Pathumwan Hotel Arcade. I once bought a couple of suits and my partner bought a couple of dresses from them. When we returned to Singapore, we discovered they were ill-fitting. The moral of the story is to make a purchase and try it for size. They are usually more than happy to make some amendments or give you a free scarf or tie. But they never refund your money. It is better not to give in to Indian touts who often assail unwary foreigners outside their shops. Their custom-made clothing is nowhere near the bespoke quality finishes that are offered. There is no similar comparison to Singapore because Singaporeans tend to buy ready-to-wear outfits. Some Singaporean women (who are older than 45) remain loyal customers at hole-in-the-wall seamstresses inside the old Far East Shopping next to Goodwood Park hotel. But the prices are going up as the eyes are getting dim. There is clear hope for Thai street culture but not for Singapore.

The Street Culture of Bangkok and other large Thai cities tend to be zoned and housed according to ethnic enclaves that back to the time of the Vietnam War. The ethnic enclaves around Nana are South Asian, the ones along Yaowarat Road are Chinese, and the ones near Victory Monument and Khao San are *farang*. Thai people in these vicinities are rude and boisterous. They have lost their charm and politeness. They have become like the Americans—rude, loud and obnoxious. People push their way through the streets, into taxicabs, and on the BTS. There is no longer any civility. Whether they are Indian, Chinese, *farang* or Thai, they are uncivil and rude. Bangkok has become another Singapore. In May 2023, a Singaporean lady reported to me that the Thai immigration officers shouted at her and her Singapore Chinese family for having misplaced their old arrival cards. The old arrival cards are no longer needed to enter any Thai airport. Yet the policies change over night and no one knows when the Thai officers will suddenly demand to inspect them or the Singapore vaccination cards or ask silly questions about where visitors are staying. Thai people have become as rude as Singapore people. Singaporeans would appear to be deaf to many foreigners. This is because they speak way above the noise levels as if they were eating in a Chinese restaurant in Hong Kong, New York or even San Francisco. It is very clear from other cases that Singaporeans and Thais have lost their civility.

6. Beggars and Two-week Millionaires in Bangkok

Begging used to be a major part of Thai Street Culture. There used to be many beggars along the street corners and shopping districts, outside coffee houses and on pedestrian overpasses and walkways. Wherever there is any access with high pedestrian movement, there will be at least one beggar. Beggars in Bangkok used to work in teams of two, usually a pathetic looking mother and child or a crippled man with no legs. Whenever there is an international conference such as an ASEAN Summit the beggars will be chased away by the RTP. Some Buddhists consider it good fortune to give alms to beggars while others take pity on their impoverished status. Singapore used to have many beggars in the 1960s and 1970s. Old Chinese aunties would beg for cash or coins

by poking their hands through HDB flat windows. One old woman who died in her small Tanglin Road flat was found dead with over SGD20,000 under her mattress. Now there are no beggars in Singapore anymore but there are beggars in Bangkok even in 2023. In fact, it is a common sight to see *farang* beggars walking the streets or nestled outside bars begging for a few *satang* or a few baht. Most of them are drunk *farang* from overspending on alcohol and women. "Two-week millionaires" is a term used to describe *farang* who spend lavishly on wine, women and song in their first two weeks in the kingdom. Thereafter they beg for food and money along the soi of Bangkok. Some eventually return to Bangkok after selling their possessions back home. They then return to Isaan or some other Thai province to marry the girl of their dreams. Some commit suicide while others raise families and take care of their wives or girlfriends' parents, families and villages. Building of schools, small motels and new homes for their Thai romances are common. There are also many foreigners who turn to begging all over the country in another kind of scam.

7. Scams

Nothing is cheap in Thailand any longer and yet there seems to be an earnest desire to scam foreigners. Thailand is well-known for its various scams. Virtually every other person you meet could be a scam artist. Some are far more experienced than others while some are well-dressed practitioners who frequent the walking bridge that connects many exclusive and 5-star hotels including the Hyatt Erawan and the Intercontinental. I have stayed at both and they are not as good as what you pay for. So those high-end hotels are also capable of misleading advertisements; unless you think that you can scam them instead. The four faced buddha is very popular with Singaporean tourists. Many of these Singaporean tourists visit the shrine every year. I met a Singapore athletic coach (track and field) on the flight to Suvarnabhumi Airport in June 2023. Apparently, each face has a different function and purpose. He said that the four-faced Buddha (*Phra Phrom*) was a holy site. Each of the four faces serves a different function (health, career, wealth and romance). Their faces are not compass directions. Devotees pray to the different faces to ask for different things and one has to burn joss sticks and walk round in a counter-clockwise manner. However, some people try to scam the devotees by selling them flowers and other offerings to burn. The Thai traditional dancers are not supposed to cost any money but some touts try to make you part with your baht. If your wishes come true you can always scam yourself and return to pray to *Phra Phrom*.

More famous scams include the water-ski scam, the fake Rolex watch scam; the Chinese gem factory scam; the missing *farang* silk clothing scam; the ghost walking and story telling scam; the tuk-tuk scam; the taxi-meter scam; and the tourist police scam. Scams in Thailand seem to go on forever. There was once a scam involving the long-walking bridge we referred to above. Well-dressed Thai men with polished leather shoes approach their victims with promises of freebies including travel to the islands, discounts at tailors, crocodile farm entry permits and other micro-scams (a scam within a scam) such as the Muay Thai scam (at the National Stadium—that was not designed for Muay Thai). There is also the Grand Palace scam. The monarch does not charge for entering the Grand Palace although some parts are off-limits on certain days and at certain times. The Grand Palace scam is one that misleads families of *farang* to other lesser temples only to return to the Grand Palace another day (for a price) when it is not "closed". The water ski scam is one where unnoticed damage are suddenly discovered after the renter returns the jet-ski resulting in thousands of baht being demanded as compensation. When the neutral police are called to investigate, they always take the side of the jet ski owner. This is for two reasons, the RTP officer is in on the scam and there is a pre-existing relationship between the jet ski owner and the RTP officer who work in tandem to scam the now long-gone *farang* tourist. Another scam involving young *farang* groups is the full moon party where fake drugs are often sold at high prices. Of course, there are scam artists every where in the world and Thailand is not an exception. But this paper is on Thailand. Hence it is not to anyone's surprise that Thailand is a country where almost everyone seems like a prostitute, pimp or scam artist.

The scams in Singapore are quite different and too politically incorrect to mention or publish.

8. Conclusion

The lack of coordination between the Building Control Act (BCA), Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, Bangkok Electricity Board, RTP and RTAF have worsened traffic conditions in Bangkok. There is also a general lack of political will among policymakers and politicians to make any changes. Since most people have become accustomed to such norms, and the tourists themselves find it a fascinating study in socio-economic and urban phenomena, there is really no desire to change. It is therefore likely that the situation will

become much worse before it becomes even more worse for all who live and work in Krung Thep Maha Nakorn. We can see that Thailand is vastly different from Singapore in terms of its population and geographical sizes. But there are many other cultural, social and political differences as well. Even the police and military are different. On any given day; one will encounter someone who gives you the wrong directions' over-charges you for something; or just makes your day another unpleasant one. Thai women have also become much weightier than 10 years ago. Many proudly display their stomachs openly as if their stomachs were a display asset. Folds of fat and poorly shaven pits greets the eye in the sweltering heat and humidity of tropical Thailand. While Singapore women are much better dressed, it appears to be more of a perversity in the hot and high humidity of the world's most expensive city. These are the major contrasts of the two cities in Southeast Asian modernity.

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